1984

Hidden Opportunities for Faculty Development and Curricular Change

Russell Lee

Michael Field

Hidden Opportunities for Faculty Development and Curricular Change

Russell Lee and Michael Field

Bemidji State University

Introduction

At a time of extreme budgetary constraints, colleges and universities typically face considerable resistance to curricular or professional development efforts from faculty members whose training and political instincts lead them to protect their own traditional departmental interests. While a variety of direct approaches to development have been successful, most of us are probably aware that many faculty members respond, at least initially, with thinly disguised indifference or even hostility when faced with overt efforts to involve them in formal development activities. It is therefore important to be aware that some of the most effective development processes need not be labelled "development," as such, and further that institutional activities undertaken for a variety of purposes offer potent hidden opportunities for faculty development and curricular change.

We have become aware of hidden faculty and curricular development benefits at Bemidji State University through our involvement as instructors in the University's Honors Program and through our efforts to evaluate the impact of the general education curriculum. In both cases neither enhancing faculty development nor reforming the curriculum was our primary intention. We discovered, however, that the

interdisciplinary team-teaching required of instructors in the Honors Program serves as an extremely effective method for fostering professional growth in participating faculty. We also discovered that on-campus research, in the form of two related testing efforts originally undertaken to gather information about general education outcomes, stimulated faculty, students and administrators alike to approach possibilities for curricular reform with new energy and enthusiasm. Both on-campus research and team-teaching are examples of activities which, while worthwhile for many reasons, offer tangible development benefits which are often overlooked.

Development Benefits of Team-Teaching

Those of us who have taught as part of an interdisciplinary team will recognize the enormous demands made upon the faculty member: extensive planning, learning material one is unfamiliar with, presenting lectures and leading classroom discussions in front of one's colleagues as well as students—these and other pressures make clear that it is usually easier, and safer, to teach conventional courses in the security of a traditional department. Nevertheless, team-taught courses, often interdisciplinary, are a continuing feature of American higher education, in spite of their demands upon participating faculty.

While the development benefits of team-teaching have been occasionally discussed (Flanagan and Ralston, 1983; Ware et al., 1978), they have never been fully recognized. LaFauci and Richter (1970, p. 70), who argue in favor of team-teaching, nevertheless stress the "unusually stringent demands on the instructor," without seeming to consider that intellectual demands by their very nature are also opportunities. Vars (1982, p. 220) acknowledges that the substantial investment in faculty planning provides "an unparalleled opportunity for faculty professional growth," but sees the high cost of providing instruction as a major disadvantage. As Eble points out, however (1972, p. 149) the expense involved in having more than one faculty member present in a classroom is less disturbing if it is understood that "the extra cost of team-taught courses could legitimately be charged off to faculty development rather than to the cost of instruction."

Our own involvement in team-teaching, as members of a teaching team and as evaluators of the team-teaching of others, convinces us that the development benefits of collaborative instruction are genuinely impressive. Our university-wide Honors Program is based upon a series of team-taught interdisciplinary courses. Staffing these courses, and designing readings for them, is difficult. The wrong "mix" of faculty can prove disastrous in the classroom. But when a team is well chosen the results can be astonishing. We have often seen a team of faculty members who have never before worked together become energized by the process of planning and teaching together.

For example, our Honors course "Studies in the Social Sciences and History" has been taught for the last three years by a team consisting of an historian, a sociologist, and an anthropologist. They decided that it would be interesting to work with the students in designing a research project on student attitudes toward religion. While the research project they designed was, in fact, an effective pedagogical technique, it was also much more. For the three instructors it was a new area for exploration—one much broader than most of their previous research efforts. While the students have benefitted from this team-taught course, one could argue quite plausibly that the instructors have benefitted at least as much.

Team-teaching in Honors has also influenced the development of new courses designed to enliven the general education curriculum. Taking advantage of an opportunity to design experimental courses for general education, two of our Honors instructors have joined with two faculty members who were previously inexperienced in team-teaching to create a new course in "Science, Values and Society." The new science course has already received national attention through conference presentations, and stands as a model that others on our campus who are interested in innovative approaches to teaching may emulate.

Research and Curricular Development

As a part of an ongoing appraisal of our general education requirements, we decided to implement two different kinds of testing: nationally normed and locally constructed. This testing has been useful both

in suggesting areas for curricular development and in fostering positive attitudes towards curricular change.

We decided, during the fall and winter quarters of 1981-82, to administer ACT's College Outcome Measures Project (COMP) assessment. Like several other recent instruments described by Gaff (1983, pp. 158-162), the COMP assessment grew out of a desire to provide specific measures of student learning outcomes with regard to broad curricular areas. The use of broad areas, we felt, would provide an integrative rather than course-specific flavor to our investigation, and would reduce faculty resistance to possibly negative findings, since specific courses would not be named.

There were two distinct advantages to using a nationally normed test such as COMP: first, that we were able to compare our results with those of a variety of other institutions, and second, ACT was able to provide a sophisticated statistical treatment of our results and, without bias, to comment favorably on our sampling techniques. ACT's analysis of our sampling gave the faculty increased confidence in our findings.

While the COMP report suggested several possible areas for curricular reform, on the whole it was highly favorable to our institution, which further increased the likelihood that our faculty would accept it. We were pleased and perhaps even slightly surprised to find that there was widespread willingness to discuss seriously the significance of the COMP findings, although there was considerable disagreement about the meaning and implications of some of the details. The testing we undertook was designed primarily to yield statistically valid information. Its hidden benefits included stimulation of campus-wide discussions about curriculum, a reduction of emotionalism and an increase in the rationality of such discussions, and perhaps most important, an almost tangible reduction in the overall resistance of both faculty and administration to curricular change.

Since the results of our broadly aimed, nationally normed research were so favorable we decided to pursue areas of curricular change more precisely by using local research. Using the COMP findings as a guide, we focused on student and faculty attitudes about more clearly identified areas where change was needed. Prior to conducting the COMP research, this particular research effort might have been met

with suspicion. We found, however, that faculty had become used to using research results in curricular discussions and, in fact, appreciated the more specific information that our local research was able to give. We were careful, as with the COMP research, to use sophisticated sampling and analysis techniques both because they increased the accuracy of our findings and also precluded the contamination of self interest on the part of the researchers.

Conclusions

Our efforts at both institutional research and team-teaching have yielded major benefits other than those for which they were originally under-taken. The gathering of research data on student competencies seemed, indirectly, to increase faculty willingness to discuss possibilities for curricular changes, perhaps in part because controlled research provided what Schein calls a "neutral cover" (1977, p. 45), lending academic legitimacy to an often emotion-laden issue. Team-teaching within the Honors program has provided multiple benefits in the form of renewed faculty vitality, expanded research interests, and stimulation of teaching innovations outside the Honors program.

While the experiences we have described were in part serendipitous, we believe it is possible and desirable to make planned use of many hidden opportunities for faculty development and curricular change in institutions of higher education. We hope that our description of hidden benefits will help those concerned with fostering development processes to identify, encourage and benefit from what may be powerful yet unrecognized opportunities for professional and institutional development.

References

Eble, Kenneth. *Professors as Teachers.* Jossey-Bass: San Francisco, 1972.

Flanagan, M. F. and Ralston, D. A. "Intra-Coordinated Team-Teaching: Benefits For Both Students and Instructors." *Teaching of Psychology,* 1983, Vol. 10 (2) pp. 116-117.

Gaff, Jerry G. *General Education Today.* Jossey-Bass: San Francisco, 1983.

La Fauci, Horatio and Richter, Peyton. *Team-Teaching at the College Level.* Pergamon Press; New York, 1970.

Schein, V. E. "Political Strategies For Implementing Organizational Change." *Group and Organizational Studies.* 1977, Vol. 2 (1) pp. 42-48.

Vars, Gordon F. "Design for General Education: Alternative Approaches to Curriculum Integration." *Journal of Higher Education.* 1982, Vol. 53, pp. 216-226.

Ware, M. E., Gardner, L. E. and Murphy, D. P. "Team-Teaching Introductory Psychology as Pedagogy and For Faculty Development." *Teaching of Psychology.* 1978, Vol. 5, pp. 127-130.